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S E C R E T ANKARA 004524

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#), [TU](#)

SUBJECT: A TURKISH PROPOSAL TO MAKE MECCA AND MEDINA  
AUTONOMOUS

(U) Classified by DCM Robert Deutsch; reasons: 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Action request--para 7.

[1](#)2. (S) Summary: A key Embassy contact on Islam in Turkey is launching an effort within the Muslim world to turn Mecca and Medina into an autonomous zone. He seeks USG financial support to bring his project to fruition. We will inform him that the U.S. cannot support such an initiative unless Department instructs us otherwise by Aug. 20. End summary.

[1](#)3. (S) Bedreddin Habiboglu has proven himself an extremely insightful contact on Islam and the Islamic landscape in Turkey. Habiboglu is the son of the late Ziya Habiboglu, one of Turkey's most revered Islamic thinkers of the second half of the 20th century, and a man who -- according to Bedreddin -- had extraordinary access to the inner circles of the House of Saud and to Saudi Arabia's leading theologians. Thousands attended Ziya Habiboglu's funeral in 1996. Bedreddin Habiboglu has a degree in theology from Ankara U. and a background in sociology. A journalist, he used his former interview show "Terazi" (Balance) on independent Channel 8 to grill prominent Turkish religious figures, including controversial fundamentalists (e.g., Abdurrahman Dilipak). We have observed his wide range of contacts. He is frequently sought out by Turks of various stripes and political and Islamic affiliations for his views and advice on religion and politics. Judging by what we have seen and heard (e.g., being interviewed by Baghdadi journalists) we think his contacts are broad as well among both Arabs -- his Arabic is fluent and subtle -- and Iranians.

[1](#)4. (S) Habiboglu has raised with us an idea to make Mecca and Medina an autonomous zone, somewhat similar to an Islamic Vatican. He asserts that the idea is different from proposals to re-establish the caliphate. He claims the idea as his own, and demands that we keep his approach and idea closely held. We note, however, that the idea has circulated in Turkey at various times over the past 30-35 years, including under the late PM/President Turgut Ozal.

[1](#)5. (S) Habiboglu's point is that the hajj is one of the main obligations of Islam. To make the hajj correctly, there are four conditions: (1) be a Muslim; (2) be free of debt; (3) be safe in one's person on the hajj; and (4) be safe from robbery on the hajj. Habiboglu says the fourth point is a problem for all Muslims since Saudi Arabia charges exorbitant fees for transport, lodging, and food; the fees are an irritant throughout the Islamic world, he says. He would propose to have Mecca and Medina run on a rotating basis by members of the OIC. His initial proposal is that each country would run the zone for three years; there would be a small permanent international staff to ensure logistics, crowd control, and other facilities and services. Habiboglu asserts that all OIC members, even Saudi Arabia, would go for the idea like a shot. He also underscores the point that, without a way for Islam to free itself from tyranny and politicization, the BMENA project has no chance of success.

[1](#)6. (S) Habiboglu says he needs \$8mm-\$10mm to bring the concept to fruition (for travel to most OIC countries and several offices in key countries to lobby and coordinate), and looks to the USG for financial support. He estimates the project would take one year-18 months to complete. He is determined to press ahead and says he will propose the idea to others, including the Russians, if we turn it down.

[1](#)7. (S) Action request: Habiboglu has asked for a clear answer, either yes or no, by August 20 if possible. A clear no will not bother him, he claims. Unless instructed otherwise by Aug. 20, we will inform Habiboglu that the USG would be unable to support such a project.

EDELMAN